

# HOW YOUNG ADULT NOVELS PORTRAY VICTIMS OF SUICIDE ACCORDING TO DOCUMENTED PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILES

by  
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## Introduction

Children are curious about death, and as they become adolescents and are exposed to the reality of death more often, they come to realize that death is a natural part of life. But when that death is a suicide, the tables are turned, and the adolescent suddenly doesn't understand that type of death as being natural. Adolescent suicide is a growing problem in today's society; it is the third leading cause of death after accidents and homicides. Reported by the National Center for Health Statistics, that number is about 5000 per year in the fifteen to twenty-four year old age groups. (Robbins, 1998).

Many authors of young adult books have done a wonderful job of writing specifically for adolescents who want information about suicide. There are non-fiction as well as fiction books that cover a wide variety of subjects dealing with suicide. Reading provides one way for youth to widen their horizons and experiences. There are six ways in which reading can help deal with loss and pain: to identify with others, to realize they are not alone, to extend horizons, to aid the catharsis process, to lead to insight and to facilitate the sharing of problems. (Payne, 1986). "But if young adults are to gain these insights, as well as an understanding of death and the grief process, the novels they read need to portray the patterns of human reactions to loss and the common stages of mourning accurately and realistically" (Harvey & Dowd, 1993, p.141). It is up to our libraries to keep our young adults connected to these books, to provide current information and interesting novels that concern real-life situations and that may help avoid the situations that occurred in the books that I have critiqued.

There have been many studies of adolescent suicides that have resulted in psychological profiles of the young adult suicide victim. Most suicides fit at least one

category of these profiles, but typically they fit more than one category. In this paper, I have conducted a study of young adult novels that deal with suicide and, using the documented psychological profiles, have specifically determined whether the suicide victim fit into any categories of the profile before the suicide occurred.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review nine young adult novels that involve adolescent suicide, to determine if the suicide victim fits the psychological profile of an adolescent at risk of suicide, and to show evidence of this behavior from passages in the novel.

### Literature Review

#### Psychological profile of the adolescent contemplating suicide

There have been many studies that have documented the psychological profile of young adults who commit suicide (Capuzzi & Golden, 1988; Holinger, et al., 1994; Kaywell, 1993; Leenaars & Wenckstern, 1995; McDowell & Stillion, 1994; Robbins, 1998). Of these studies, Eugene McDowell and Judith Stillion did the most comprehensive study. They point to four major categories of risk factors that contribute to suicidal behavior at every age: biological, psychological, cognitive and environmental. For this paper I will concentrate on the adolescent section of the McDowell and Stillion study and add aspects of the other studies to substantiate their findings since most of the studies included the same categories as McDowell and Stillion.

### Definitions

Biological factors are those that have some type of family influence or previous family behavior. Robbins' (1994) view is that children tend to model the behavior of their parents which does not necessarily mean that suicide is genetic but the child has a tendency to pick up habits from parents that may be potentially dangerous.

Psychological factors are usually associated with some type of depression or factors caused by depression. Since adolescents are establishing their sense of identity during this time period, suicidal adolescents are developing the coping skills needed to deal effectively with these challenges (McDowell and Stillion, 1994).

Cognitive factors are those that are negative in thought and action, with the thought process becoming very narrow. This is a time when adolescents begin to think in the abstract for the first time, which often leads to idealized worlds that do not correspond to reality (McDowell & Stillion, 1994). This, in turn, causes feelings of self-consciousness, which make minor events into major ones.

Environmental factors are the physical situations caused by the actions of others, usually family or friends. Dysfunctional families are often a sign of potential trouble. The adolescent is usually ignored and the family is often unresponsive to his or her needs.

### Biological Factors

Most adolescents who attempt and complete suicide are males. McDowell and Stillion attribute this to males being more aggressive than females and "more likely to turn that aggression on themselves" (1994, p.13). Four times more males than females succeed in committing suicide, but three times as many females as males attempt it.

Males often use violent means, with firearms and hanging as the first and second choices respectively (Holinger et al., 1994), while females are more likely to use pills (Kaywell, 1993). There is evidence that suicides tend to run in a family so the probability of suicide increases among adolescents if a parent or relative has committed suicide (Capuzzi & Golden, 1988). Robbins (1998) also cites this same theory as a biological factor. If a parent is suicidal, a child may pick up these tendencies. When cluster suicides occur in families, suspicion may be raised about genetic traits. "The most lethal warning is previous suicidal behavior..." (McDowell & Stillion, 1994, p.13). One study (Farberow, 1991) showed that prior self-destructive behavior (especially a suicide attempt) is a predictor of later completed suicide. Another major contributing risk factor that McDowell and Stillion (1994) point out is puberty itself. The increased production of hormones and the process of maturation that takes years to complete "add weight to the tumult of this age period, and we believe, increase suicide risk." (1997, p.16).

### Psychological Factors

Depression and low self-esteem are important components to all suicides. A feeling of hopelessness, along with depression, enhances suicidal tendencies and may be a "stronger predictor" (McDowell & Stillion, 1994) than depression. "It is a reasonable hypothesis that a person with very low self-esteem...would be more prone to attempt suicide than would a person with very high self-esteem" (Robbins, 1998, p66).

Holinger, et al. (1994) cite depressive disorder, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia as being the main causes of psychological suicidal behavior. Capuzzi and Golden (1998) also mention that poor self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy are predictors.

"Unfortunately, our society has very narrow definitions of what adolescents, of either sex, must look like.... Because adolescence is often an awkward physical stage for both sexes, many teenagers feel unattractive, unpopular, and unhappy. The lack of acceptance of their physical selves makes it difficult for many to achieve feelings of self worth" (Gill-Wigal, 1988, p.35).

### Cognitive Factors

Most suicidal adolescents tend to focus on current problems such as a failed relationship. They linger on negative aspects of their lives and ignore positive ones. They see suicide as the best and only answer to their problems (McDowell & Stillion, 1994). Holinger (1994) sees this as social isolation that includes inability to name friends and transient personal relationships. Leenaars and Wenckstern (1995) list two cognitive risk behaviors. One is a verbal statement of a desire to die or commit suicide, which is a risk behavior that is often ignored. Most adolescents will give a warning sign such as a verbal threat, but often in a very subtle way. The other cognitive risk behavior is the adolescent's "narrowing of the range of perception of opinions that occur to the mind, using words like 'only,' 'always,' or 'never'" (1994, p.137). One of the most obvious signs of a planned suicide is giving away possessions. It is "a clear cutting of lines to the future" (Tomlinson-Keasey & Keasey, 1988, p.237) and shows the finality of the suicidal act as the last resort. Adolescents will give their favorite possessions to their family or friends because they feel they will have no need for them again.

### Environmental Factors

There are many environmental factors that will increase the risk of adolescent suicide: a negative family experience, abuse, separations, loss of a loved one, or the presence of firearms. Holinger et al., (1994) also list family problems and availability of firearms as risk factors. Capuzzi & Golden (1988) cite family break-ups, economic difficulties in the family, abuse, and unrealistic parental expectations. Two more events of importance to this age group are copycat suicides and suicides by famous people. It is documented that adolescents have the highest vulnerability of any age group to cluster and copycat suicides. The suicides of peers and famous people appear to have a more impressionable effect on this age group (McDowell & Stillion, 1994; Davidson & Gould, 1991; Coleman, 1987).

### Culture and society's influence on adolescents of the 90's.

Since the former studies were completed, more research has been done to bring the information on adolescent suicide up to date to include new problems that adolescents are faced with in the 1990's. This era has become a fast-paced and stressful society that has made our adolescents grow up long before their time. "There is ample evidence that today's teens face a plethora of problems, ones which teens...in 1980 did not face" (Carroll, 1997, p.28). There are many other studies that back up these findings (McDowell & Stillion, 1994; Leenaars & Wenckstern, 1995; Newton, 1995) but Pamela Carroll's article (1997) describes the scenario best. Many adolescents are losing their family structure to divorce. "About forty percent of the current adolescent generation are children of divorce as opposed to eleven percent of the generation before them" (p.28).



Parents become so involved in their own problems that adolescents tend to distance themselves from the family to get away from the turmoil.

Teen poverty is another problem that teens of the 90's face. They tend to have improper medical care and are 300% more likely to become high school drop outs or victims of violent crime (Carroll, 1997).

Most adolescents have no idea the number of problems, illnesses and diseases that casual sex can cause. Many pregnant teenagers are often left alone with no support from the father of the child (if they even know the father). No longer does the father "do the right thing" and marry the mother. A teenage mother in the 90's will either have an abortion, miscarry or a very few will resort to adoption. Many raise their babies for a short time and then hand them over to a family member to raise. In addition to unwanted pregnancies, there are STD's and AIDS to worry about. Homosexuality and lesbianism were probably never addressed as adolescent issues before the 90's. Most gays and lesbians do not identify themselves as such until they are in their twenties, but homosexual adolescents have feelings that they are different. "Some studies indicate that males may first be aware of being erotically attracted to other males as early as age twelve, and that same-sex erotic attraction by females can happen as early as age fourteen" (Carroll, 1997, p.30).

Drug and alcohol abuse among adolescents has grown at an alarming rate. The following statistics (Lerner, 1995) are staggering:

- In 1990 about 25% of 12- to 17-year-olds used illicit drugs
- About 10% of sixth graders have initiated alcohol use. In addition, about 25% of 12- to 14-year-olds and more than 50% of America's seventh graders are currently users. About 40% drink weekly.

- About 92% of high school seniors report some experience with alcohol, and one third use alcohol daily. In addition, one third are binge drinkers, which is defined as having five or more drinks in a row.
- About 66% of high school seniors have some experience with cigarettes and 19% smoke cigarettes daily.

The next area that Carroll addresses is abuse, crime, violence and gangs.

Carroll explains that from 1965 to 1988, the number of violent crimes committed by eighteen-year-olds doubled. Criminal activity is often caused by peer pressure and socioeconomic status.

Sexual abuse has also become a threat for young females, especially incest, typically involving a stepfather or another older male known to the family.

The last area that Carroll discusses is hopelessness, depression and suicide. "Hopeless teenagers also tend to be dysfunctional in areas related to friends and family. Once puberty has begun, hopelessness may lead to depression. Young adolescents who are depressed tend to believe that they won't get more of the good things out of life than other people, and that there is no use in trying to get what they want because they see little prospect of achieving goals" (Heaven, 1994, p.217).

Unfortunately depression often leads to suicide. "Completed suicides [in adolescents] have increased from approximately 1,200 a year to 5,200 a year in the past 30 years" (Carroll, 1997, p.32). Carroll seems to think that many of these problems may be addressed with the adolescents by having them turn to books that deal with the problem that they are facing. She lists many books that are suitable for each area that has been discussed. "Because teens do turn to young adult fiction as a source of information as well as for pleasure or escape, the body of literature which focuses on their problems should be held up to scrutiny" (1997, p.33).

Adolescents may not show more than one or two signs but usually, when family members and friends look back on the situation, the signs may have been very clear, but unrecognizable because people did not place them in the proper context. The following list (Table I) was derived from the documented profiles that I researched.

Table I. Risk factors

Documented study

Biological	
1.Genetic predisposition to depression	Robbins, p.44; McDowell & Stillion, p.11
2.A family member committed suicide.	Capuzzi & Golden, p.68
3.Previous attempted suicide	Kaywell, p.238
Psychological	
4. Depression resulting from a non-biological factor	Robbins. p.72; Curran, p.34, Carroll, p.32; Holinger, et al., p.115
5. Low self-esteem	Robbins, p.72; Gill-Wigal, p.35; Kaywell, p.238
6. Feeling of hopelessness or helplessness	Robbins, p.72; Carroll, p.32
7. Feelings of inadequacy	Corr, p.9; Holinger et al., p.115
8. Pre-occupations with death	Kaywell, p.238
9. Becoming cheerful after depression	Kaywell, p.238
10. Perfectionism	Robbins, p.72; Corr, p.159
11. Copycat suicide	Corr, p.160
Cognitive	
12. Dramatic changes in personality	Curran, p.137; Kaywell, p.238
13. Failed relationship	Curran, p.139; Kaywell, p.238
14. Verbal statement about desire to die or commit suicide, sometimes subtle hints that may be ignored	Curran, p.139; Kaywell, p.238; Leenaars & Wenckstern, p.137.
15. Withdrawing from family or friends	Curran, p.130; Corr, p.159
Environmental	
16. Negative family relationships	Holinger et al., p.115; Corr, p.157; Carroll, p.29
17. Sexual abuse	Carroll, p.31
18. Death of a loved one	Capuzzi & Golden, p.263
19. Presence of firearms	Holinger et al., p.115; Kaywell, p.238; Robbins, p.30
20. Using drugs or alcohol	Curran, p.138; Carroll, p.31; Kaywell, p.238
21. Family members using drugs or alcohol	Carroll, p.29
22. Difficulties in changing family situations (divorce, separation)	Carroll, p.29
23. Pregnancy	Carroll, p.29
24. Giving away possessions	Curran, p.39; Tomlinson-Keasey & Keasey, p.237

## Methodology

Content analysis is a traditional method in research methodology for examining issues related to library science. Manifest content analysis looks at the face of the document to examine what is obvious and easily observed. Latent content analysis looks for themes that might explain the meaning and probable effect of occurrences within the document. The methodology used in this paper was latent content analysis. This method "assigns documents...to classes or categories to quantify one or more of their characteristics" (Allen & Reser, 1990, p.253). Nine books in which the main theme was adolescent suicide formed the basis of this study. Prior to analysis, I chose the books from various sources such as Joan F. Kaywell's list in Adolescents at Risk. This list gave brief descriptions and listed any awards or special recommendations from organizations such as the American Library Association. I also used a list of books from Pamela Sissi Carroll's article in English Journal, called "Today's Teens, Their Problems, and their Literature: Revisiting G. Robert Carlsen's Books and the Teenage Reader Thirty Years Later." This article had various sections about cultural changes in the 90's that might lead an adolescent to attempt suicide and each section had recommended books for adolescents and parents to read. I also used Children's Books in Print. I searched Amazon's and Barnes and Noble's web sites to pinpoint specific books on adolescent suicide, and there I found perhaps forty titles that had descriptions. I skimmed about twenty books and discarded the ones that obviously did not fit my criteria. I read eleven books and discarded two (sometimes before the reading was completed), again because they did not fit my criteria. There were some minor limitations to my selection because of accessibility. Six books were borrowed through Interlibrary Loan because they were not

available at any of the local libraries or bookstores. In the nine books that I read in detail, my criteria were that the books should have an adolescent suicide victim, and the main character telling the story should also be an adolescent. Each book was read with attention to the psychological profile of the suicide victim, noting any evidence of risk factors that he or she demonstrated and noting passages in the book that gave this evidence.

#### List of Books Analyzed

- Bunting, E. (1985). Face at the Edge of the World. New York : Clarion Books.
- Crutcher, C. (1989). Chinese Handcuffs. New York : Greenwillow Books.
- Draper, S. M. (1994). Tears of a Tiger. New York : Simon and Schuster.
- Irwin, H. (1988). So Long at the Fair. New York : Margaret K. McElderry Books.
- Peck, R. (1985). Remembering the Good Times. New York : Delacorte Press.
- Pevsner, S. (1989). How Could You Do It, Diane? New York : Clarion Books.
- Pfeffer, S. B. (1980). About David. New York : Delacorte Press.
- Schulte, E. (1982) Joanna. Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Pub.
- Sheldon, M. (1981). Perhaps I'll Dream of Darkness. New York : Random House.

#### Content Analysis of Books

##### Book 1

- Bunting, E. (1985). Face at the Edge of the World. New York : Clarion Books.

Jed Lennox' best friend, Charlie Curtis, committed suicide by hanging himself.

Jed did not have a clue why Charlie did it, and the book turned into a mystery as Jed and his girlfriend, Annie, tried to look at the past to find out what caused Charlie to take his life. Charlie, who was African-American, had been dating Dominique, who was Caucasian, but they were keeping their relationship a secret because Dominique was afraid of what her parents would say and do. After Charlie's suicide, Jed learned that Charlie and Dominique had broken up just a few days before the incident. When Jed met with Charlie's mother after the funeral, he found out that Charlie had left Jed his prized motorcycle, and he had also left Jed a note that said there was another part to the note and that Jed would know where to find it.

Charlie's suicide brought back memories to Jed of a girl, Idris, who had disappeared just a few months before - everyone thought that she had run away because she was considered a druggie and a prostitute. She ran with a rough crowd from the high school and her boyfriend was a known drug dealer. Jed started questioning Dominique and friends of Idris to see if there was some connection between Charlie and Idris. In the meantime, Lon, who was a friend of Idris's boyfriend, also committed suicide, but since Lon's father was a Congressman, the death was covered up and was ruled accidental.

After searching for the second clue to Charlie's suicide, Jed finally found the second part of the note, which Charlie had delivered to Jed's house the day before he died. In the envelope Jed found the truth. Charlie had described the whole scenario of what had caused him to take the only action he felt he could. 'Charlie and Dominique were out together at a familiar hangout that the teenagers used for clandestine meetings. This was a lookout over the ocean with a very steep drop-off and the kids had nicknamed the place "the edge of the world." After they had been there a little while, and had made

love, Charlie kept hearing someone in the woods nearby. On investigation, he found Idris near death. She was high on some type of drugs and had been raped. Charlie wanted to put her in the car and take her to the hospital but all Dominique could think about was that they would be found out - that her parents would know she had been seeing Charlie. She convinced Charlie to leave Idris there hoping someone else would find her and take care of her. Dominique was convinced she was already dead but Charlie didn't think so. They left and Charlie took Dominique straight home and came back to get Idris but when he got back, Idris was gone. He kept thinking someone might have found her or that she had come to and walked away and gotten help. But he didn't see her for days and wondered what had happened. A few days later he finally got the courage to go looking for her and found her body at the bottom of the lookout. He knew that whoever had drugged her and raped her, most likely her boyfriend and his friends, had come back to get rid of her body and thrown her over "the edge of the world." Lon had committed suicide because he couldn't get the look on her face out of his mind. Charlie could not come to tell anyone the truth because his guilt at not taking Idris to the hospital to begin with was more than he could live with. In the note, Charlie asked Jed to take the information to the police because he knew that Jed would be able to "do the right thing because I can't."

## Risk Factors

### Factor 4, Depression:

Charlie was obviously depressed by the death of Idris, knowing that he could have tried to get help for her. In Charlie's letter to Jed: 'I stopped writing poetry



because my words frightened me...I walked in the darkness of the pit where there was no light and from which I could never escape.' (p.149).

And "She [Dominique] tried to make me forget and sometimes I could. But then I'd look at Idris's poor, broken mother, I'd look at Hysinger and his friends who could be selling bad stuff to another girl, killing another one, killing dozens... (p.149).

Factor 6, Feeling of hopelessness or helplessness:

Charlie's depression had put him over the line and he felt that he had missed his chance to take action to prevent Idris's death. He felt helpless to do anything after he found out she was dead. From Charlie's letter to Jed: 'There's a time to do what's right, and then the time passes and it's gone forever. For me, it had gone.' (p.149).

Factor 12, Dramatic changes in personality:

When Idris disappeared and no one knew what had happened to her. Charlie had been very upset to the point of being obsessed by her disappearance. He had gone to see Idris's mother to say he was sorry that she was "gone" because he knew that he had a chance to help Idris but did not. (p.74).

Factor 13, Failed Relationship:

Charlie had broken up with his girlfriend, Dominique a few days before his suicide (p.24).

Factor 24, Giving away possessions:

He left Jed his motorcycle, and a note, and had told Jed that there was another part of the note and that he would know where to find it - it held the clue to why he

had committed suicide. Charlie had told his mother about a week before he committed suicide that he wanted Jed to have the bike when he was gone. She thought he meant when he had gone off to college (p.48).

Factor 25, Racial Issues:

Charlie was African American and Dominique was Caucasian so they had been keeping their relationship a secret from their parents. Charlie silently blamed Dominique for not letting him help Idris - Dominique was more concerned about what people would think and that their relationship would be exposed. She wasn't concerned about Idris since she considered her a druggie and a prostitute - her life wasn't worth saving because she said that Idris would eventually kill herself in a matter of time anyway (p.148).

Book 2

Crutcher, C. Chinese Handcuffs. New York : Greenwillow Books, 1989.

After Dillon Hemmingway's older brother, Preston, committed suicide by shooting himself right in front of Dillon, Dillon started a journal addressed to Preston about his thoughts and fears, in which he tried to explain why he thought Preston killed himself. Dillon gave some clues in his writing about Preston's physical and mental state. Dillon thought Preston never had a sense of humor which left him nothing to fight back with when times got rough. When they were very young, he and Preston had killed a neighbor's cat, Charlie, and had realized, after the fact, just how senseless an act it was. It seemed to have a lasting effect on Preston.

As Preston got older he became more independent and bought a motorcycle in spite of his parents' protests. He got involved in a biker gang that led to Preston's drug use. This combination eventually led to an accident in which Preston lost both his legs. Preston had a girlfriend, Stacy, who had stayed by him even after his accident.

Dillon finally told about the day that Preston killed himself. Preston asked Dillon to go out to the old cemetery with him to shoot at some cans. Since Preston and his father liked to hunt, they had guns readily available. While they were sitting, talking and shooting at cans, Preston was acting very strangely, and Dillon asked him what was wrong. Preston went off into a long story about some bad things that had happened the night before - he was in a bar with a bunch of his biker buddies and some girl had come in and was flaunting herself among the guys. Some of the men ended up having sex with her on the pool table while others cheered her on. At some point, a couple of guys had put Preston on the table and the girl by then was a mess because they had been knocking her around, but she refused to have sex with Preston - she walked away from him, fell to the floor and passed out. Preston had been humiliated by the incident. While Preston was telling this story to Dillon, he had the gun in his hand and before Dillon could react, Preston shot himself in the head.

Dillon became a friend with Stacey again after about a year. After Preston died, Stacey had gone off to visit an aunt after school was out for the year, and right after she came back, her parents decided to adopt a baby that belonged to a distant cousin who couldn't take care of it. Once Dillon started thinking about the situation, he realized that the baby was actually Stacey and Preston's baby because the baby, Ryan, was almost always with Stacey, and she seemed to have bonded with him as a mother would.

Another clue was the fact that he looked so much like Dillon as a baby. Dillon put two and two together and figured it out, because right before Preston killed himself, he told him he had left him a note and "something else, too." Near the end of the story, Dillon finally approached his father about the fact that they never talked about Preston and the fact that their family had split up because of his death. (Dillon's mother and younger sister had moved away after the tension became unbearable). Dillon's father admitted that he was partly responsible for Preston's lack of a sense of humor. He had just gotten out of the service, and when Preston was born, he was very strict on him and was insensitive to his feelings. Dillon's father had eased up a bit by the time Dillon and his sister were born. They promised to help each other become a family again, and to include Dillon's sister in their family too. There was another side story going on during this about Dillon and his friend, Jen. Dillon found out that Jen was being sexually abused by her step-father (and her grandfather when she was very young) and was on the verge of committing suicide herself until Jen asked Dillon for help just as she was getting ready to jump from a water tower. Dillon had followed her there and told her that he couldn't let her go because he couldn't take another suicide, and that if she jumped, so would he. He was able to talk her down eventually. Jen finally got some help, and Dillon was able to close his journal to Preston with no more feelings of guilt.

## Risk Factors

### Factor 5, Low Self Esteem:

Preston was older but much smaller than his brother and was bothered by this fact (p.7). Preston had lost his legs in a motorcycle accident and was self-conscious

about it (p.57). The incident in the bar the night before Preston killed himself was very humiliating. Preston: "I started thinking about the cat, Charlie, and I told myself, clear back then, if I ever got that far out again, well, that would be the end of me. Well, last night I did it" (p.57).

Factor 7, Feelings of inadequacy:

The conversation between Dillon and Preston just minutes before Preston commits suicide:

Dillon: "Hey Pres, what's the matter?"

Preston: "A lot. A lot's the matter."

Dillon: "What."

Preston: "Well, to start with, you. You're the matter."..."I got to go out honest,"

Preston said. "Do you know what it's like watching what I could have been if I were big and strong and so goddamn *cool* all the time? So frigging *funny*?"

Dillon: "Nope, I guess I don't"

Preston: "Well, it ain't a lot of fun" (p.54).

Factor 12, Dramatic changes in personality:

Joined bikers' club that got him involved in drugs (p.49).

Factor 14, Verbal statement about desire to die or commit suicide:

From same conversation in factor 7:

Dillon: "Wanna go back home and catch some shut-eye?"

Preston: "No. I'm not that tired. This is the day for it."

Dillon thought he meant shooting cans (p.53).

Factor 19, Presence of firearms:

Preston owned a hunting rifle (p.51).

Factor 20, Using drugs or alcohol:

Preston was into drugs and was known to frequent a bikers' bar (p.51).

Factor 23, Pregnancy:

Preston found out the night before he committed suicide that his girlfriend, Stacey was pregnant.

Stacy: "You know, Dillon, you said part of it might be your fault, knowing how crazy he talked that day and all."

Dillon: "Yeah"

Stacy: "Well, you only get half the blame because he killed himself the day after I told him I was pregnant. You might have provided the murder weapon, but I supplied the motive" (p.123).

### Book 3

Draper, S. M. (1994). Tears of a Tiger. New York : Simon and Schuster.

The book was written in chapters by characters in the story that included letters, essays, poems, thoughts, conversations and other modes of general information.

Four African-American students from the local high school were involved in a serious accident that left the captain and star of the basketball team, Rob Washington, dead. The driver of the car, Andy Jackson had been drinking, but he and the other two passengers were unhurt.

Andy immediately started to feel responsible for of the accident. He was charged with DWI and vehicular homicide, but the vehicular homicide charge was dropped with a two year suspended sentence. He lost his driver's license until he was 21 and had to attend Alcohol Rehabilitation classes. Andy tried to carry on as usual but became more distant with his friends. He eventually started seeing a psychologist at the request of his parents, even though he thought it was unnecessary. Andy continued to dwell on Rob's death and eventually his grades slipped, he slept in class or was just in a daze with his head on his desk. Eventually he started missing school, and he seemed to have a careless attitude about his personal cleanliness. His girlfriend, Keisha, had been his crutch throughout the whole ordeal, but when they had an argument about Andy's preoccupation with Rob's death, Keisha told Andy that she was sick of his sob stories and walked out on him. Rob tried to explain the situation to his mother when he got home, but she just told him that "time heals all wounds." Andy felt as if he were drowning. Late one night, when he was feeling as low as he could get, he decided to call someone, anyone, just to talk but he could not find anyone at home. Even his psychologist was out of town on a family emergency. When he could not find anyone to confide in he tried to sleep but could not. The next morning he got up to go to school but came back home after everyone else had left the house and killed himself with his father's hunting rifle.

### Risk Factors

#### Factor 5, Low Self Esteem:

Rob talking with the psychologist:

Psychologist: How did you feel right after the accident:

Andy: Like a piece of crap.

Psychologist: Why?

Andy: 'Cause it was my fault that Rob died.

Psychologist: Why do you say that?

Andy: I was drinkin', I was drivin.' (p.39).

#### Factor 6, Feeling of hopelessness or helplessness:

Talking with his psychologist:

Psychologist: What do you think would happen if you did volunteer and answer the questions correctly?

Andy: I even tried that. It don't make no difference. I got an A on a test in advanced math and when the teacher gave back the papers he said..."Even Andy got an A this week. I must be slipping - my tests are getting too easy if even Andy can get an A on them, or maybe he cheated" (p.144).

Just before Andy kills himself he is thinking: "It's not that I want to die - it's just that I can't stand the pain of livin' anymore. I just want the hurt and pain inside to go away" (p.53).

#### Factor 8, Preoccupation with Death:

Andy and his girlfriend, Keisha, were walking home in the snow. Andy says, "I was just thinking about how cold my feet are and how uncomfortable it makes me feel. And I was just wondering if Robbie is feeling like this all over."

Keisha: "Andy, I don't think you should be talking like this."

Andy: "So cold. So cold. I can't stand it! I can't stop thinkin' 'bout Robbie out there frozen and cold in the cemetery. It's drivin' me crazy! (p. 79).



Talking with the psychologist:

Psychologist: "Have you ever thought about being dead, Andy?"

Andy: "I used to. Right after the accident I wanted to be dead. I wanted it to be me that was dead instead of Rob. I wanted the hurtin' to go away."

Psychologist: "What about now? Do you ever think about death?"

Andy: "To tell you the truth, man, I think about it all the time."

Psychologist: "There's nothing wrong with thinking or talking about death, Andy..."

Andy: "So I ain't crazy?"

Psychologist: "Not even a little bit"

Andy: "Supposed it's more than just thinkin' about death in general. Suppose I told you I sometimes think about killin' myself."

Psychologist "I'd say I'm not surprised. Sometimes it's part of the guilt and grieving process - to consider suicide as an alternative to the pain. But the answer is *life*, Andy, not death" (p.82).

Factor 14, Verbal statement about desire to die or commit suicide:

Andy was waiting for his dad to show up to pick him up after the game. His parents were supposed to come to the game but never made it. Andy was talking to the Coach: "Rob's parents were at the game. It must have been awfully hard...it's like they supported not just Rob, but the whole team.... My folks didn't even bother to show up. *I* should be the one dead, not Rob" (p.35).

Factor 15, Withdrawing from family or friends:

Andy was late for basketball practice. "He's been real moody lately, Coach.

Sometimes he just likes to be alone. He don't talk to us like he used to" (p.32).

Factor 16, Negative family relationship:

Andy with Psychologist:

Psychologist: "Do you think your parents understand your problems?"

Andy: "Heckee, no! Sometimes I think my parents ain't got no grip on reality. My mother lives in "la-la land." Do you know that she still says "Negro"? and refuses to call us black or African American?... So me and my mom kinda stay out of each other's way. We don't dislike each other - we just don't think alike" (p.42).

Psychologist: "What about your dad?"

Andy: "Man, he hasn't got the slightest idea what I think or care about. He once told me that he hoped I'd go into the business world with him when I finished college. But I plan to use my lips for kissin' beautiful women, not the soles of some bald-headed white man's feet" (p.41)

Factor 19, Presence of firearms:

Andy's father had a hunting rifle that Andy used to commit suicide (p.143).

Factor 25, Racial Issues:

Psychologist talking about Andy's classes:

Andy: "I like gym and I like lunch and I even like history, but don't tell my history teacher that. I got her fooled. She thinks I'm not paying attention, but I could tell her every wife of Henry VIII and what he did to each one, and why. But she never asks."

Psychologist: "Why do you think she never calls on you?"

Andy: "I don't know. I guess she just assumes I'm another stupid black kid...Lotsa white kids and some of the white teachers too, think all of us are sorta dumb. The teachers ask us easier questions, if they ask us anythin' at all, and they expect dumb answers. So I just give 'em what they want" (p.52).

This also overlaps with the parents' racial attitudes in Factor 16.

#### Book 4

Irwin, H. (1988). So Long at the Fair. New York : Margaret K. McElderry Books.

This novel was written in four parts. The first part was just a few pages that introduced the main characters, Joel Wendel Logan III and Ashley, both very intelligent high school students in the Talented and Gifted Program (TAGS) and from very affluent families.

"Joe" Logan wrote the second part. He had been drawn to the fairgrounds where Ashley had recently committed suicide. His parents were away so he ended up staying for a few days, just hanging around taking in the atmosphere, earning money by washing dishes and just making friends in general with the people who worked there, trying to sort out his feelings about Ashley.

The third part was about Joel and Ashley. They had been friends since elementary school and this part of the story explained their relationship and also gave some clues to Ashley's decision to commit suicide. Ashley had always spoken her mind about everything and was a worrier about things that she had no control over. One

section of this part takes place at the fair grounds after Ashley had won the famed Logan trophy for horsemanship - again. She convinced Joel to take her on the Ferris wheel, knowing that he did not like heights, but he agreed. In her senior year, Ashley decided to help out at an alternative school since she only had morning classes. She was tutoring dropouts who were trying to make a better life for themselves. She took her tutoring very seriously, and when the local paper wanted to do a story on Ashley and her students, she agreed. It appeared in the paper but it turned out to be a story all about Ashley, how smart she was, how talented, how many awards she had won, and her horse show career, but nothing about the teenagers whom she was helping. She had wanted the attention to go to their successes, not her own. That must have been the last straw. She drove out to the fair grounds and swallowed a bottle of pills and ended her life.

The fourth part was Joe's thoughts as he left the fair, still wondering why Ashley had taken her life.

#### Risk Factors

##### Factor 6, Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness:

That semester Ashley worried about the future.... Ashley thought she had to change the world.... Ashley believed without hope. The polar ice cap was melting, the environment was polluted, and a nuclear bomb could go off any minute (p.183).

##### Factor 7, Feelings of inadequacy:

Ashley and Joel on the Ferris wheel, stopped at the top:

Joel: "So what should we do with all this time we have -- besides hold it?" I wasn't trying to tease her. I was serious.

Ashley relaxed and leaned back in the seat, making it sway slowly. "Share the world with each other. See things from a new perspective."

Joel: "That last jump must have scrambled your brain. You don't sound like you."

Ashley: "That's the problem Joel. I'm finding out I don't know who me is, or maybe I'm discovering that I don't like the me I do know. It's hard to explain."..."None of that matters. None of it's really important. Don't you see? I've spent all my life doing things that don't take any effort and that don't make any real difference in the world. I might as well have never existed" (p.173).

#### Factor 10, Perfectionism:

Ashley was a TAG - Talented and gifted student and pushed herself, although once she purposely failed a test to prove a point. She had asked Joel, "What's so great about being smart?" (p.131).

Ashley was a great horsewoman and had won every year that she had competed at the annual horse show. This year she had decided she might not enter and Joel asked why she would want to break a perfect record. Ashley said, "Perfection can be boring" (p.152).

#### Factor 16, Negative family relationships:

Ashley and her mother were always at odds. Her mother wanted her to be perfect and Ashley wanted to choose her own way in life. Joel: I don't know if they ever talked to each other about it, but Ashley said once, "Mother can't understand me. She doesn't approve of what I do. I don't approve of how she thinks. You can't love and control at the same time, can you?" (p.99).

Factor 26, Acting as extreme activist:

Ashley was an activist from the time she was a child. She protested everything that she did not believe was right: animals in zoos, dissecting frogs, she pulled the head off her Barbies as a child because they were too perfect.

She won a national essay contest on the role of women in the political power structure but refused to accept the prize because the judges were all men (p.99).

She hated Christmas. She said, "What a commercial thing to do to a perfectly nice little baby" (p.120).

When Ashley told Joel she would be teaching drop-outs at an alternative school he asked her why she "harbored this innate urge to guide the blind and reform the world?" Ashley stopped and turned to him and in her familiar fierce voice said, "You don't need a reason for doing something. You need a reason for *not* doing it." Joel: That was the closest Ashley had ever come to explaining how her head worked, and though I listened, I still didn't understand (p.179-180).

### Book 5

Peck, R. (1985). Remembering the Good Times. New York : Delacorte Press.

Buck Mendenhall first met Kate Lucas when they were about to begin 7th grade. Kate lived with her mother and great-grandmother, Polly, on a small farm that was once a big orchard. Kate looked after Polly while her mother worked, and Kate's father was totally out of their lives. Buck lived in a trailer with his father and saw his re-married mother only occasionally. They lived in a very small town that was being inundated with

wealthy families wanting to move to the suburbs. Kate and Buck were inseparable friends but gained a new friend in 8th grade when they met Trav Kirby, from one of the affluent families. The three spent quite a bit of time, especially in the summers, with Kate's great-grandmother, who was a very wizened but gentle old woman.

The three kids had a special closeness that young adults often form as children, but changes started to take place as they matured in different ways. They were still best friends but they had their own lives, too. The three stayed friends through high school with the usual activities keeping all three busy at different things. Buck was into sports and worked a part time job, and Kate took care of Polly and was very interested in drama, getting a main role in one of the school plays. Trav spent most of his time putting a lot of pressure on himself to be perfect because his parents expected him to be that way. He studied constantly to make good grades. He also worried about things that he could not do anything about like a revolution in Mexico or Cuba. He worried about which classes to take and what his college transcript would be like and wondered about the difficulty of SAT's. Kate and Buck discovered another side of Trav on one occasion when Kate and Buck were invited to Trav's house for a party. They were given a peek into Trav's room and noticed that he had many children's toys lined up on a high shelf, as well as a Paddington bear on a chair. This seemed unusual to Kate and Buck, and they commented on it later between themselves.

Trav continued the pressure on himself and eventually did something totally out of character. He was caught shoplifting. Since it happened at the very end of the school year, just before finals, he skipped the end of the school year and was gone all summer. He reappeared suddenly the day before their sophomore year was about to begin. They

hadn't heard from him all summer. He came to Kate's where she and Buck and Polly were playing a game of cards. He brought presents, some of his prized possessions: he gave away the stuffed Paddington bear that Kate had seen in Trav's room, he gave his calculator to Buck, and he brought Polly some perfume. He seemed cheerful and talked about how he had missed everyone and school beginning and his classes. They noticed that he seemed relaxed and talked about his classes being "no problem." Kate and Buck thought Trav was fine, but Polly seemed reluctant to accept his cheerfulness and renewed commitment to a new school year.

The first day of class, Kate and Buck were called to the office and were taken to Kate's house where her mother and Polly and Buck's father were waiting to tell them that Trav had hanged himself in the orchard. They started thinking back on the little things that finally added up to Trav's suicide. There was no funeral, so closure was difficult for Kate and Buck. The school had an open forum so that parents and students could talk about what had happened and how the problem could be addressed for the future. The school board virtually blamed Trav's parents for putting too much pressure on him to be perfect. Trav's parents blamed the school for not giving Trav the challenge he needed. But it was Polly who eventually set everyone straight with her seasoned knowledge that everyone needed to be able to recognize when others had problems that they were hiding from their parents or friends. After this open forum, Kate and Buck were finally able to come to terms with Trav's death and stop blaming themselves for not seeing the signs.



## Risk Factors

### Factor 6, Feeling of hopelessness or helplessness:

Buck says "Poor old Trav, he's a worrier. Period" (p.70).

Buck: "Trav worries about stuff that hasn't happened. He worries about things he can't do anything about (p.73).

Polly says, "He ain't in a hurry to grow up. He dreads it" (p.33).

### Factor 9, Becoming cheerful after depression:

When Buck returned from his summer away he seemed very laid back. "Trav settled back in his chair, more laid back than ever.... Trav was always so clenched up about stating school. Now he seemed totally relaxed..." (p.162).

### Factor 10, Perfectionism:

Even though he was in the 9th grade he was already worrying about what his college transcript would look like, taking SAT's, what courses would be best for 11th and 12th grades, while his friends were just thinking about getting settled into high school (p.97).

Trav was always putting pressure on himself to get perfect grades and please his parents because they wanted him to be that way (p.73).

### Factor 12, Dramatic changes in personality:

Trav was caught shoplifting - toys, similar to ones that Kate and Buck had seen in his room. They thought he did it to get back at himself and to get his father involved. Kate: "...Trav's a big burden for Trav to carry around all on his own. I think he just wanted to shift the burden, to stop having to be responsible..." "Why is Trav a bigger burden to himself than anybody else?" (p.139).

Factor 14, Verbal statement about desire to die or commit suicide:

After a play in which Kate had the lead part, Trav and Buck were discussing Kate's performance. Buck says, "Someday we'll be able to say we knew her when."

"You will." Trav's eyes were on Kate in the distance. "I won't be here."

Buck: I thought he meant he'd be out in the world, being a success himself.

Maybe at Harvard or someplace like that. I don't know what I thought" (p.134).

Factor 24, Giving away possessions:

He gave Kate his Paddington Bear; he gave Buck his calculator on his last visit to them (p.161-162).

### Book 6

Pevsner, S. (1989). How Could You Do It, Diane? New York : Clarion Books.

Diane and Bethany were half sisters. Diane's father was married to Bethany's mother and the family grew by two more children, Nell and Ned, after the marriage. Diane and Bethany always got along. They were only five when they met, but they became best friends and even chose to share a bedroom in their new house in spite of having room enough for each to have her own room. When Diane was 15, she took an overdose of drugs and died. Bethany found her body in their rec room one day when she came home from school. No one knew why Diane had committed suicide, and Bethany had to look back to the past to find a reason for her sister and best friend's death. Bethany's recollections revealed many clues to Diane's suicide.

Bethany seemed to accept Diane's death very quickly, but she put her energy into trying to get her family back on track. Her little sister, Nell, was undergoing many problems associated with Diane's death. She helped set the table for dinner and always included a plate for Diane. She would hide under Diane's bed with something that belonged to Diane. Ned was also having problems in school with acting out and slipping grades. Bethany's parents seemed oblivious to their problems and tried to shut Bethany out when she told them that their family was slowly breaking apart.

Bethany finally decided that she had to find a reason for Diane's death so she talked to the two boys with whom Diane had been involved and also Diane's best friend, Hope. In Bethany's investigation, she found out that Diane had, in addition to her first boyfriend, Steve, another boyfriend, Max, whom she never talked about much. Bethany found out from Max that Diane was angry with Steve because he had broken up with her and that she thought Max was jealous of Steve, but Max really wanted to break off his relationship with Bethany, and told her so. After Max dumped her and she realized he was a jerk, she wanted Steve back, but he was already dating another girl. So Diane was left with no one and decided to end her life.

After Bethany realized that it was nothing that involved the family that caused Diane to commit suicide, she suggested to her mother and father that the whole family get some counseling to help them over their issues. Up to this point, everyone except Bethany had been in denial about Diane's death because of his or her own problems accepting her death. Bethany's stepmother blamed herself because Diane had tried a previous suicide attempt but had not shared the information with Diane's father or biological mother. Bethany's father was furious with her mother that she had not told

him of Diane's previous attempt at suicide. Nell and Ned were so young, they thought that something they had done had caused Diane's death. After a few counseling sessions the family became whole again, and they were able to go on with their lives.

## Risk Factors

### Factor 3, Previous suicide attempt:

Diane had taken an overdose of pills at school a few months before she actually committed suicide. She told her stepmother that she was a bit depressed but that she would get over it (p.87).

Diane had also cut her arm with glass from a picture of Steve when Max broke up with her, but Max stopped her from hurting herself badly (p.106).

### Factor 13, Failed relationship:

Diane had had two failed relationships that left her hurting on the inside but showing that she didn't care on the outside. Bethany thinking, trying to make sense of Diane's death: Did Diane seriously mean to die, though, or just give everyone a scare? Was she hoping to shake up Steve, make him sorry he hadn't taken her back after her breakup with Max? (p.31).

### Factor 14, Verbal statement about desire to die or commit suicide:

After the first suicide attempt Diane told Bethany, "You know I didn't really want to die and be put in the ground. I just kind of wanted to be dead for a little while" (p.89).

### Book 7

Pfeffer, S. B. (1980). About David. New York : Delacorte Press.

Lynn Epstein and David Morris had been friends since childhood. They lived across the street from each other and their parents were also best of friends. When Lynn found out that David had killed his parents and then himself, Lynn was shocked and saddened that she had lost her best friend. They had just had lunch together the day before and had talked, but Lynn couldn't remember their conversation, and she thought David might have told her something important but she just couldn't remember what it was. Once word got around the rumors started: that Lynn was pregnant with David's child; that Lynn had an abortion; that David and Jeffrey Green, David's only other friend besides Lynn, were homosexual lovers. All rumors, nothing more.

Lynn started writing a diary to try and sort out her feelings about David's actions. David spent a lot of time with Lynn's family because he did not like his parents. David was adopted and he never felt that he was living up to their standards no matter the issue: his grades were never good enough; he stayed inside too much; he didn't hang around with the right crowd. Nothing could please them. David loved guitar, but his parents thought he was wasting time on hobbies, so he kept his guitar at Lynn's house. He also loved photography and science fiction, but his parents told him he was wasting time on such things when he should be getting better grades and getting out more.

Lynn's father was a lawyer and happened to be the Morris's attorney, so he was left with settling their estate with their extended family. In going through their safe, he found a will in the safe that David had written, obviously only the day before he died. He had left Lynn his guitar and his notebooks. Lynn's father questioned the police detective

in charge of the case about the will and found it to be valid. The detective said he didn't see anything wrong with complying with the will, but if the notebooks turned up, he would be interested in seeing them. The mention of the notebooks immediately confused Lynn because she did not know what David had been referring to. Lynn's father took her to the Morris's house on his next trip to sort out paper so that she could search the house for David's notebooks, but they did not turn up. Then Lynn remembered that David had kept a lot of his prized possessions in Lynn's attic, knowing that no one would bother them and that Lynn would not betray their trust by going through them. That was exactly where she found them. Four binders full of David's thoughts. On the fourth one he had left a note that said, "Lynn, you will understand." The notebooks were full of good things and bad. He wrote about his fights with his parents, his relationships with his friends, and whether he should keep a book at his house or at Lynn's, everything imaginable. By the time Lynn got to the last notebook she was becoming more afraid of what she was going to find out, and the last line hit her like a ton of bricks. "All David wrote were three words. 'Lorraine [his adoptive mother] is pregnant'." For years, David's parents had been trying to have a baby of their own, seeing specialists and talking about the prospects of a pregnancy. It left David with such an inferiority complex he just couldn't bear it.

Lynn did not tell anyone what she found out about David's mother, but she did decide to take the notebooks to the detective and let him decide what to do about the situation. Everyone involved was dead, so David couldn't be hurt any more unless the word was leaked to the press. After a few days, the detective called Lynn and told her she could have the notebooks back. When Lynn showed up to pick up the notebooks, the

detective talked with her about David's life and how miserable he must have been. He couldn't understand why his parents didn't get him some help. Lynn explained that they were too busy trying to make David perfect. Having a child of their own might make up for the qualities they wanted in their own child that David did not have. The detective finally told Lynn the truth - that according to the autopsy, David's adoptive mother was not pregnant. David must have imagined it or thought he overheard it, but she was not pregnant at the time of her death. Lynn finally realized that David had been so disturbed that knowing he might be replaced just sent him off the deep end. And he took two other lives with him - - for no reason.

#### Risk Factors

##### Factor 7, Feelings of inadequacy:

Lynn talking with David about his natural parents:

"It's killing me," he said that night. "I hate them those anonymous people who created me, but I want to know them. I have to know them. Who were they? What led them to that moment? What led them to throw me out, like an extra puppy in a litter? How could they do that to me? How could they not care? And why should I care so much?" (p.14).

##### Factor 10, Perfectionism:

Lynn talking with police detective: "...they were very hard on him. He didn't hate them without cause. ...They made demands on him, constant demands, he couldn't possibly hope to achieve. If he got a 90, they expected a 95. If he got a 95, they expected a 100. And if he got a 100 they wanted to know why he didn't get them more often...He'd argue for hours with teachers over a single point on an essay

exam...because his parents wanted him to be valedictorian. Nothing less would satisfy them" (p. 19).

Factor 16, Negative family relationships:

In a conversation between Lynn and the police detective about whether David knew he was adopted, Lynn told him that David knew. She told the detective that David must have hated his adoptive parents since he had killed them. But what she didn't tell the detective was that she was "fascinated by how much David hated his parents. It was cold and it was continuous...nothing broke through the wall of hatred" (p.14).

Lynn talking with the detective about his adoptive parents: "They never praised him. Never. I never once heard them say anything nice to him" (p.20).

Factor 22, Difficulties in changing family situations:

Lynn found out in David's notebooks that he thought his adoptive mother was pregnant.

Lynn: "God, poor David. Some part of him must have wanted his parents to love him, to accept him for who he was. And he had to know if they had a baby that was that. They'd never love him. I wasn't even sure they'd want to see him again.... He must have thought that if Bob and Lorraine [his adoptive parents] had another child, they'd ruin that life as well" (p.119).



Book 8

Schulte, E. (1982) Joanna. Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Pub.

Joanna Stevens was a junior in a new school after moving from Kansas to California. She felt very out of place and lonesome until a popular guy in the senior class, Matt Thompson, noticed her and asked her out to accompany him to Melanie Tillinghast's party. Matt and Melanie had been friends since childhood and had a brother/sister relationship, but Joanna was still suspicious of Melanie's cold stare at her when she found out that Matt was bringing Joanna to her party. At the party, Joanna started finding out more about Melanie's past through conversations with different people: Melanie liked to date older men, and she had dated a golf pro that her mother had dated first.

Melanie's house was in a gated community. The house was a mansion with an Olympic size pool, cabanas with swimsuits to borrow and a heavily stocked bar. When she and Matt arrived at the party, Joanna did not see adults but lots of kids from school. Joanna was faced with drinking for the first time, and she was really afraid because her father was an abusive alcoholic. She finally accepted some wine. Soon she realized that Matt had gone off with Melanie, but the other guys at the party were more than willing to keep her company. One guy in particular was coming on so strong that Joanna decided to go into the house and hide from him while waiting for Matt to take her home. She realized that she was in Melanie's room and in the dark she had turned the wastebasket over. While picking up the paper, she found a note that Melanie had written that said something about not going through it again and that she couldn't go on. She took it with

her and went back to the party that was beginning to break up. Matt had reappeared and was ready to take her home. The next day Joanna felt terrible but tried to shake it off, knowing it was a hangover.

Joanna had accepted an invitation from David, another friend, to his house that night for a casual get together. During the social, there was a phone call for the attending minister. Melanie had committed suicide by overdosing on pills and her family wanted him to conduct the funeral. Joanna thought back to the note that she took from Melanie's room and realized that she might have helped - it was a suicide note. Matt called Joanna and asked to meet with her. He proceeded to explain their relationship. Melanie had had an abortion once, and was pregnant again. That's why he and Melanie were talking privately at the party - they were making plans for Matt to take Melanie to get the abortion. Both pregnancies had been by an older man who had promised to marry Melanie, but he backed out. Melanie couldn't go through with an abortion again so she had taken her own life.

The rest of the story was mainly about Matt and Joanna's problems - Matt also tried to commit suicide because of his guilt over Melanie's death. He crashed his car on purpose while Joanna was with him. Fortunately, they both survived the car crash, but Matt was left paralyzed.

#### Risk Factors

##### Factor 4, Depression:

Melanie was depressed about being pregnant a second time, the father of the baby did not care about her and she had no one else to turn to. She felt suicide was the only way out of her dilemma (p.79).

Factor 5, Low self-esteem:

Melanie did not feel good about herself because she had become promiscuous at a very young age. She tried to appear mature by dating older men (p.75).

Factor 13, Failed Relationship:

Melanie's first and second pregnancies were both by the same man. She didn't tell him the first time, but had an abortion. The second time she was expecting him to come to her party so they could announce their upcoming marriage, but he never showed up at the party (p.78).

Factor 23, Pregnancy:

Melanie had been pregnant before and now she found herself in the same situation a second time. She just couldn't go through with it. She was having nightmares about babies coming to her that were dead (p.74-74).

### Book 9

Sheldon, M. (1981). Perhaps I'll Dream of Darkness. Random House, New York.

Susan was a high school senior. Her 14-year-old sister, Effie, had committed suicide, so Susan started a journal to try and organize her thoughts about what might have caused Effie's death. The story is mainly about their normal childhood together in spite of their parent's divorce. Effie had been known to have crushes on lots of people like the mailman, her teachers, the lady at the flower shop, etc. She would write letters and tear them up and often follow the people around. They usually lasted about two weeks and

then she would be on to someone else. Soon she was hooked on a rock star, and this crush did not go away. She became obsessed with David Angel and had pictures and records and knew almost everything there was to know about him. She started a fan club and recruited other girls. They were very serious about their club. They didn't talk about anything except David Angel.

Effie had always been her father's favorite daughter; even though he tried not to show it, it was very obvious. When he found out that David Angel was going to be giving a concert in their city, he managed to get two tickets for Effie and himself. Effie was beside herself with joy. Soon Effie's father was sending her to all of David Angel's concerts that were on his tour - she went to at least nine of them by herself. Susan finally got to attend a concert with Effie when her father was able to get an extra ticket. Susan was appalled at what she experienced: the huge crowd of people wailing and groaning, people using drugs, a girl hitting her head on the floor, the smell of drugs, the volume of the music. Of course, Effie denied that any of the other concerts had been that way. When the tour was over Susan and her mother were relieved that Effie would get back to normal. She had missed a lot of school, although her father always vouched for her absences, but her schoolwork did not suffer because she had always been a good student. But it wasn't over. Effie had disappeared for a full Saturday and just when her mother and Susan were ready to call the police, Effie's friends' mother called to say that Effie was at their house and was okay. What Effie never told anyone was that she had found out that David Angel had moved close by, and she and two of her friends had gone to see him. Effie was the only one brave enough to go to the door. He let her in, and they talked for a few minutes about his music and his guitar. Before Effie knew what was happening,

David was all over her and was trying to rape her. Her friends heard her screams and came to rescue her.

The same evening, David Angel committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. The news reports were full of stories about a dozen paternity suits and how he was heavily into drugs. Effie was obviously upset but the next morning she came to breakfast talking about the fact that David Angel had shot himself with a Colt .45. She had talked to a friend of hers, Alexandra, about the gun because Alexandra said that her father had one exactly like it that he kept under his bed. The next afternoon, Effie asked Susan to take her shopping, but she wanted to stop by Alexandra's house on the way because she had left her sweater there the last time she had been over. Susan sat with the motor running, waiting for Effie. Soon she heard noises coming from the house and Alexandra was running towards Susan. Effie had knock her down and run into her parent's room and locked the door. Effie had found the gun and used it on herself.

## Risk Factors

### Factor 11, Copycat suicide:

Effie did not cry when she heard the news - she seemed in shock. But she was silently planning a way to die the exact same way David Angel had died (p.84.)

### Factor 15, Withdrawing from family and friends:

Susan's writing: Effie found it hard to make friends. It should have been the easiest thing in the world for her - she was such a kind little girl...Not that anyone ever hated Effie - it was just that she was always the odd one, the one with no partner in dancing class. She got bullied a lot. Maybe she was shy. Maybe the

other kids resented her always being the teacher's pet. Maybe she was a little different. But Effie always tried so hard to be liked (p.12).

Factor 19, Presence of firearms:

Effie finds out that her best friend's father has a gun exactly like the one that David Angel used to kill himself. She secretly planned a way to get access to it and use it on herself (p.84)

### Discussion

After analyzing these nine books for psychological profile risks, I found that all of the books demonstrated multiple risk factors. Two books had three risk factors, two had four risk factors, one book had five, two books had six, one books had seven and one book had eight factors. Of the twenty-six risk factors listed, all but four were represented among the nine books.

The novels spanned the years 1980 to 1994, but I did not notice any pattern in the methods of suicide that might have given the reader a clue to what year was being portrayed. There were also not many identifying instances or newsworthy items in the novels that gave clues to the year in which they were written. Only one novel, written in 1989, involved heavy drug use by the victim, one of the risks that was noted in the literature review by Carroll as a 90's factor, but it did not cause the death. But this does not mean that the factors are only related to a certain time period. Many of the factors are timeless, indicating that a study involving a larger number of more recent books might warrant another look at the 90's influence to substantiate Carroll's claims.

McDowell and Stillion's study, as well as the others reviewed, proved to be correct in their observations. In the biological environment, the methods chosen for suicide included three female victims using pills to cause death by overdose, while a fourth female chose a gun because she was committing a copycat suicide. The pill overdoses were appropriate for their environment, but the one female who used a gun was a bit more independent in her thinking: she was committing a copycat suicide and the circumstances had to be the same as closely as possible.

Male adolescent suicides by firearms account for the most used method, with hanging the second method. The three males that chose guns either owned their own guns or had access to guns, all that were used for the purpose of hunting. I assume that the two males who chose the method of hanging did not have ready access to firearms so they had to find another way. Hanging, as a second method, was the choice in these cases, proving the documented profiles correct.

In the biological category, only one factor, a previously attempted suicide, was represented. A female had attempted a suicide in the past but her mother had covered it up so help was not sought at the time of the first incident. The second attempt was successful. According to the documented literature, if the first attempt had been exposed and help received, the second attempt may have not occurred. The other two categories that suggest biological factors were not represented. This may suggest that having a relative that is depressed or that commits suicide does not always have an effect on an adolescent contemplating suicide. If these factors had been represented, they may have been interpreted by the suicide victim that if it were acceptable for a relative to do it, then it would be acceptable for the adolescent also.

In the psychological category, the most common factor was a feeling of hopelessness or helplessness. This factor was exhibited in four novels. The next two factors commonly represented were low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy and perfectionism, each in three novels. Depression was the main factor in two novels. And three novels each exhibited signs of pre-occupation with death, becoming cheerful after depression, and a copycat suicide. All of these factors are attributed to an adolescent's struggle with change, somewhat like becoming a new person, with which some adolescents are unable to cope. The literature cites this problem as one of the main psychological factors for adolescent suicide. As the reader, one recognizes the signs and is wondering why the family and friends are oblivious to what is happening. According to the literature, this age group has the hardest time coping with stress and depression. An observant parent or friend should recognize their signs.

In the cognitive category, the most represented factor was making a verbal statement about a desire to die or commit suicide. The other three factors, dramatic changes in personality, failed relationships and withdrawing from family or friends appeared in three novels. These signs should have been much more obvious than the psychological factors because they usually cause more dramatic actions by the victim. They are also becoming very self-conscious and are vulnerable to small mistakes that are blown out of proportion.

In the environmental category, two factors appeared with the same number of incidents: a negative family relationship and the presence of firearms. Pregnancy and giving away possessions each appeared in two novels, using drugs or alcohol and difficulties in changing family situations each appeared in one novel. In this category,



two factors did not appear in any of the novels: sexual abuse and death of a loved one. The environmental category represents the more silent factors. An adolescent may tend to hide his negative family relationships from friends. Conniving young adults can easily hide alcohol and drug use. And an unwanted pregnancy will almost always be hidden until an abortion is performed or the secret cannot be covered any longer. These factors seem to be the result of dysfunctional families in which adolescents may not be supervised or given the attention that they need.

There were two factors that were not in any of the profiles that I researched, but I felt they were important enough to contribute to the victims' suicides. One factor was a racial issue. The relationship of a bi-racial couple had a significant impact on the outcome of the victim's decision to commit suicide. (This factor appeared in another novel but the racial issue had no effect on the suicide.) Another factor was what I termed acting as an extreme activist. This factor might have been categorized as a dramatic change in personality if it had occurred later in life, but she had been that way since she was a child, and I feel it added some weight to her decision to end her life.

Among the nine suicides of these young adults, there did not seem to be a great deal of mourning past the initial visiting the family and burial ceremony. In all of the novels, the suicides were revealed early in the story, with the storyteller looking back at what had happened to cause the victim to take such drastic actions. They seemed to turn into a mystery that had to be solved, with the storyteller becoming a detective and trying to gather as much information and evidence as possible. I felt a sense that perhaps this may be one of the few ways to write such a novel. When suicides happen, especially unexpectedly, everyone starts thinking back to remember some little incident that

happened with him or herself and the victim, something that might have hinted at the future. All of the novels had endings that were resolved to the point that the remaining family and friends were able to go on with their lives, either by accepting the suicide as something that no one could have prevented at the time, or by seeking professional counseling.

In analyzing Table II, I discovered that the authors chose to use predominantly the factors that fell into the psychological, cognitive and environmental categories. The psychological category had the most factors represented in the areas of low self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, and feelings of inadequacy. These are the most prominent reasons discussed in the documented literature for adolescents to commit suicide. The next most used factors were changes in personality, failed relationships and statements about wanted to die or commit suicide. In the environmental category, which was the next most prevalent, family relationships and the presence of firearms were major factors. Most of the factors in these categories are related to society's anxieties and fixations on perfectionism, appearance, being part of a group or clique, having a happy family life with both parents present, and being a normal adolescent.

The factors represented the most, as reasons for suicide, are the opposite ideal of what an adolescent should be. It seems that if any one of these factors became a problem, or if the situation escalated until two or more factors became problems, it was too much for the adolescent to bear. The authors have obviously used the psychological profiles to make their characters' situations as real life situations. These are all factors that adolescents deal with every day. The literature provides the basis for these factors being major influences on the lives of adolescents, and how they are unable to cope with more

than one or two factors until their resistance is lowered to thoughts of suicide.

Adolescents have not changed that much over the generations. Their biggest challenges is that today's society has placed such pressure on adolescents to become adults at an earlier age than previous generations. They are exposed to drugs, sex, dysfunctional families, and are ostracized because of sexual orientation and receive criticism about the way they dress and their general appearance. The list could go on and on. They are in a turmoil over all of the options that they are faced with and how, or whether, to react to certain situations. They are getting mixed signals from adults that make it difficult to understand what is expected of them.

I think the author's intent in each novel was to show that even the most trivial factor, especially combined with one or more other factors, could lead to tragedy and all of these novels had multiple factors that led up to the tragedy. "Adolescents who kill themselves experience a steady toll of threat, stress, failure, challenge and loss that gradually undermines their adjustment process. They are unable to cope "(Leenaars & Wenckstern, 1995, p.133). These risk factors should not be taken lightly, but should be taught to parents and adolescents so that they are recognized and help can be sought.

Table II. Risk factors

Incidents documented listed  
by Author

Biological	
1.Genetic predisposition to depression	
2.A family member committed suicide.	
3.Previous attempted suicide	Pevsner
Psychological	
4. Depression resulting from a non-biological factor	Bunting, Schulte
5. Low self-esteem	Crutcher, Draper, Pevsner, Schulte
6. Feeling of hopelessness or helplessness	Bunting, Draper, Irwin, Peck
7. Feelings of inadequacy	Crutcher, Sheldon, Pfeffer, Irwin
8. Pre-occupations with death	Draper
9. Becoming cheerful after depression	Peck
10. Perfectionism	Irwin, Peck, Pfeffer
11. Copycat suicide	Sheldon,
Cognitive	
12. Dramatic changes in personality	Bunting, Crutcher, Peck
13. Failed relationship	Bunting, Pevsner, Schulte
14. Verbal statement about desire to die or commit suicide, sometimes subtle hints that may be ignored	Crutcher, Draper, Peck, Pevsner
15. Withdrawing from family or friends	Draper, Pevsner
Environmental	
16. Negative family relationships	Draper, Irwin, Pfeffer
17. Sexual abuse	
18. Death of a loved one	
19. Presence of firearms	Crutcher, Draper, Sheldon
20. Using drugs or alcohol	Crutcher
21. Family members using drugs or alcohol	
22. Difficulties in changing family situations (divorce, separation)	Pfeffer
23. Pregnancy	Crutcher, Schulte
24. Giving away possessions	Bunting, Peck
Other types of behavior not documented in this research	
25. Racial issues	Bunting, Draper
26. Acting as extreme activist	Irwin

## Conclusion

It appears obvious that over the years young adult novelists have done and are continuing to do a wonderful job in writing accurate and effective books that deal with suicide. The topic itself is not pleasant but one that must be addressed. When it happens to a friend or a family member it causes pain and confusion. Young adult fiction can do wonders to dissuade potential victims from committing the final act. In this paper I have looked at the many ways in which the authors have used the volumes of documented literature that explain adolescent suicide and the risk factors that may be hard to recognize at first. Each book had at least three of the psychological risk factors present as reasons the adolescents chose to end their lives. As parents and as librarians, we must do more to ensure that these risk factors are known facts when dealing with young adults, and we must train ourselves to recognize even the smallest hint and be ready to place these books in the hands of the ones at risk. Most adolescents will probably find it comforting to know that the feelings that they are experiencing are normal, and the books may persuade them to get some help before it is too late.

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